

June 16, 2000  
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## The Virginia Model SRO Program

**Introduction:** During the past few years, Virginia has created a state level infrastructure to guide the development of its local School Resource Officer (SRO) programs. This infrastructure includes new resource manuals for SROs and educators, new curriculums for basic and specialized SRO training classes, a greatly expanded training schedule, grant conditions that promote “the Virginia Model” of SRO programming, and a data collection system that supports local program development and supplies data for program evaluation. This article describes the infrastructure and presents findings from the first analysis of evaluation data.

**Background:** In Virginia, as in other states, the shooting deaths of students in Mississippi, Arkansas, Oregon and Colorado established school safety as a major public issue. In response, Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore increased the federal grant monies used for hiring School Resource Officers (SRO) and the Virginia General Assembly provided new state funds, the SRO Trust Fund, for the same purpose. These monies were allocated to Virginia localities through grants awarded by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS).

As a consequence, between July 1, 1998 and July 1, 1999, the number of SRO grants administered by DCJS increased from 24 to 111 with the value of these grants rising from \$730,000 to \$2,315,000. The number of grant-funded SRO positions increased from 32 to 122. Most of these positions helped to establish new SRO programs or expand programs that were less than three years old. At the time, these positions constituted 29% of an estimated 375 SRO positions statewide.

**New Resources:** As more SRO programs were created, staff of the Governor’s Office for Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities and the DCJS Crime Prevention Center (CPC) worked to create model SRO policies and procedures and improve other aspects of SRO programming. The staffs’ most significant products were the *Juvenile Law Handbook* (a synopsis of juvenile law intended for school administrators)<sup>1</sup> and the *School Resource Officer Resource Handbook* (information on community policing in schools, SRO roles, the school environment, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), model policies and procedures, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Virginia Juvenile Law Handbook for School Administrators*, (updated annually), Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, Crime Prevention Center.

<sup>2</sup> *Virginia School Resource Officer Resource Handbook*, Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, July 1997.

**New Training Standards and Workshops:** Other staff work was directed at increasing the skills and abilities of SROs. A complete overhaul of the Basic SRO School curricula was undertaken, experienced SROs and special topic experts were recruited as instructors, and the number of Basic schools offered annually was doubled. The SROs attending these schools were asked to rate the adequacy of the individual training sessions and their ratings and written comments analyzed. These analyses and other feedback revealed the need for advanced training sessions to clarify and facilitate the partnering of SROs and the school administrators with whom they work. Consequently, the DCJS SRO Program Manager created four advanced workshops:

- Legal Issues for SROs and School Administrators,
- Critical Incident Response in the School Environment,
- Signs and Symptoms of Drug Use among Adolescents, and
- Bullying Prevention and Intervention Strategies

The new curricula, workshops, and training schedule are advancing the professional stature of Virginia's SROs and promoting the institutionalization of SRO programming across the Commonwealth.

**New Legislation:** The Virginia General Assembly enhanced SRO programming directly by creating a SRO Trust Fund for underwriting grants for new SRO positions, and indirectly by

- requiring every school to create and implement a crisis management plan,
- requiring the Virginia Department of Education to issue guidelines for conducting student searches and school safety audits,
- requiring all schools to conduct safety audits, and
- creating a new Virginia Center for School Safety that is charged with providing safety training for school personnel, conducting research, disseminating information, and promoting public/private and public safety/educator partnerships that facilitate the improvement of school safety and security.

**New Evaluation System:** Another effort (by DCJS evaluators and consultants hired by the Governor's Office for Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities) produced a new system of SRO program evaluation. Implemented in Spring 1999, the system garners information about school crime, student and school staff opinions on school safety, SRO activities, and the factors SROs perceive as hampering or facilitating program implementation. The data is used to assess SRO programming in general, to inform SROs and school officials about crime in specific schools, and to inform these persons about the level of concern that students and staff have regarding school safety. Findings from the first analysis of this data were published in March 2000.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Evaluation of Grant-Funded SRO Programs*, DCJS Crime Prevention Center, March 2000. May be downloaded at [www.dcjs.state.va.us](http://www.dcjs.state.va.us).

**The Virginia Model SRO Program:** Finally and perhaps most importantly, grant guidelines were issued that encourages the adoption of the “Virginia Model” of SRO programming. The guidelines require that:

- SRO programs reflect “a community-oriented policing philosophy,”
- All persons hired as SROs be “certified, sworn, law-enforcement officers,”
- The officers hired have community experience which “demonstrates their interest and ability to work with youth, school personnel, and the public to solve problems.”
- SROs perform multiple roles including those of law enforcer, instructor of law-related education classes, criminal justice liaison, role model, and crime prevention specialist,
- SROs complete a 40-hour, DCJS sponsored SRO Basic School, and
- SROs be assigned to a single, specified secondary school. Assignment to two schools is permitted if the schools are close in physical proximity.

The guidelines have advanced the professional stature of SROs and promoted program standardization.

**State-Level SRO Infrastructure:** The combination of new written resources, training curricula, workshops, evaluation system and guidelines constitute a unique, state-level infrastructure for improving local SRO programs. Although developed as a means of assisting SRO programs that receive DCJS grants (81 programs), the new infrastructure is proving beneficial for all Virginia SRO programs. Forty-eight (48) of Virginia’s 129 local programs are funded entirely by local revenues and/or by federal monies obtained from locally initiated grants. The SROs and school officials of these programs have availed themselves of the resource handbooks, the revised and expanded school and workshop offerings and, to a lesser extent, the incident reporting procedures and surveys of the evaluation system.

**Initial Evaluation Findings:** The first analysis of evaluation system data focused on program activity between January and July 1999, a period in which 57 DCJS grants supported 63 SROs in 44 localities. Its purpose was to find out the extent and nature of criminal behavior in the schools served by grant-funded SROs, the opinions of school staff and students regarding this behavior, and to learn about the types of activities and initiatives that SROs judge to be effective. School staff was also asked to assess their schools’ SRO programs.

Evaluation data was obtained from 3,244 school incident reports (SIRs), 2,067 school staff surveys, 11,864 student surveys, and a content analysis of the written responses from 104 SRO quarterly activity reports (QARs).

**Limitations of the Data:** An objective, empirical measurement of the impact which SRO programming has on school crime will not be possible until incident reporting is uniform and reliable within and across SRO programs. Until such time, trend analyses shall be limited to the examination of incidents at specific schools, and then only when the amount and accumulated years of SIR data are sufficient. Though regrettable, the success or failure of SRO programming may be just as reliably measured by the attitudes and opinions that school staff, students, and parents hold regarding school safety and security. It may also be evident in the reduction of events not easily measured (bullying, profanity, minor vandalism, etc.).

Information on factors affecting the data is available from the author. Note, however, that the data is not generated from randomly selected samples of local programs or SROs. Our findings, therefore, do not reflect SRO programming, school crime or student/staff opinions across the Commonwealth. Rather, they reflect these characteristics as they exist in the schools served by DCJS funded SROs. The localities in question are newer and comparatively more rural than those served by locally funded SRO programs.

**School Incident Findings:** Although no standardized criteria guided the use of the incident reporting form (SIR) during the evaluation period, SROs were encouraged to submit a SIR any time an incident involved behavior that violated the *Code of Virginia*. The SIR data revealed that:

- 48% of all reported incidents were crimes against persons; 18% were property crimes; 10% were drug related; and 2% were gang related. The incidents occurred primarily outside of school buildings (31%), in classrooms (24%), or in school corridors (19%). The average number of incidents per middle school grade was higher than that per high school grade.
- Five offenses accounted for 53% of the incidents: use or possession of tobacco (19%), disorderly conduct (14%), profanity (8%), verbal threatening (6%), and truancy (6%).
- 85% of all offenders were students and 76% were male students; 24% of the victims were school staff; and 50% of the victims were female.

**Staff /Student Opinions on School Safety:** The survey data revealed that:

- Both students and school staff members feel safe at school. 78% of the students and 85% of the staff reported feeling either “somewhat” or “very” safe at school. Slightly lower feelings of safety were found among the female and urban sub-samples of these groups.
- Staff members were more concerned that intruders would victimize them (24%) than would students (11%), gang members (13%) or parents (6%). Staff and students felt most vulnerable in places where students congregate freely and where school staff may be absent (parking lots, hallways, bathrooms, stairwells, cafeterias, locker rooms, etc.).

- 35% of the students and 15% of the staff reported that, in the past six months, items had been stolen from their desks or other places. 14% of the staff had property purposely damaged and 12% said they had been threatened with physical harm.

**Staff Opinions of SROs:** SROs are a welcome presence in schools. Ninety percent (90%) of all staff “strongly agreed” with the statement: “I support having a SRO assigned to my school.” This level of support was found among all sub-samples (urban-suburban-rural, male-female, and middle-high school) and was even higher among staff who had relatively more frequent or longer contact with SROs. Six percent (6%) of the staff simply “agreed” with the statement and 4% said they were neutral on the issue.

**SRO Activity and Opinion:** The quarterly report data revealed that SROs are actively performing their designated roles and are impacting the school environment by:

- participating in school security assessments,
- applying CPTED principles to reduce the probability of crime,
- developing school crime prevention policies (critical incident, weapons, intruder, etc.), instructing legal education classes,
- intervening in conflicts before they involve Code violations,
- increasing the level of student supervision,
- counseling troubled students,
- developing crime information networks, and
- involving students and staff in crime prevention activities.

SROs are also gaining acceptance as players in school disciplinary processes and are increasing the usage of school and community resources for resolving conflict, aiding victims, and reducing the destructive impulses of at-risk youth. While some SROs noted resistance from school staff, the staff survey data revealed that staff support rises as does the frequency and the duration of SRO/staff contacts.

**Conclusion:** A wide range of criminal behavior occurs in Virginia secondary schools, yet its frequency is low. And although student and staff fears of being victimized are not insignificant (particularly in certain school locations), the great majority of students and staff feel safe. School staff members strongly endorse the presence of SROs and SROs report success in reducing violence, preventing conflict, and improving school security. The new infrastructure guiding SRO program development is in its infancy, yet the data suggests a very positive impact.